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THE IMPACT OF AN OPERATIONAL VOID:
THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM, 1961-1963

A Monograph

by

Major Gregory B. Conover

Armor

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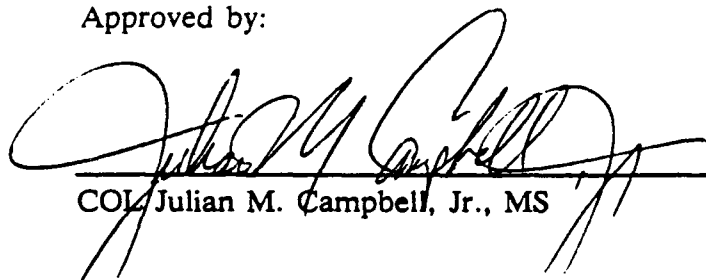
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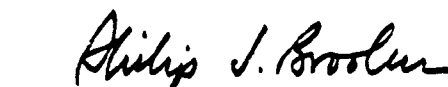


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ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF AN OPERATIONAL VOID: THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM, 1961-1963 by Major Gregory B. Conover, USA, 38 pages.

The Vietnam conflict spread dissension into every corner of our political and cultural environment and shattered the foreign policy consensus that had guided US relations since World War II. The initial combined effort of the United States and South Vietnam to defeat the insurgency was the Strategic Hamlet Program. This monograph argues that the Strategic Hamlet Program failed due to the absence of an operational link between strategic concept and tactical execution.

The monograph initially reviews the strategic context that existed in South Vietnam during the critical period of 1961-1963, that window in time in which the United States first became an active and full-fledged ally of the South Vietnamese. This review establishes that the two partners held very different perspectives on the conflict and had different objectives in mind when they entered into the Strategic Hamlet Program as a combined effort.

Next, the author describes the Strategic Hamlet Program and identifies its intended objectives. This is followed by an analysis of why the Strategic Hamlet Program failed, a failure characterized by haste, ineptitude, lack of civic assistance, and the absence of critical quality control.

The author identifies four principal lessons. First, one should avoid attempting to accomplish significant political or social reforms while simultaneously trying to conduct a major counterinsurgency operation. Second, for a program to be effective, there is an absolute requirement to establish an operational link between strategic concept and tactical execution. Third, there exists an inherent "influence dilemma" that every third party must face in a counterinsurgency effort. Finally, every insurgency/counterinsurgency is unique and must be analyzed and judged on its own merits.

The monograph concludes by arguing that the strategic hamlet approach does have utility as a general counterinsurgency strategy in certain types of situations and suggests encadrement as a means for attaining the critical requirement for local security in such an effort.

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I. INTRODUCTION

When historians look back upon the national security experience of the United States during the 20th Century, at least three events will stand out as particularly important. The First World War will be acknowledged as marking the rise of the US as a major power and the Second World War will be recognized for ushering in the nuclear age and firmly establishing the US as a superpower intent on playing an activist role on the world scene. But it will be the conflict in Vietnam that will be recognized as the experience that spread dissension into every corner of our political and cultural environment and shattered the foreign policy consensus that had guided US relations since World War II. For the society as a whole, it fueled a sense of lost purpose, insecurity, and withdrawal into neoisolationism.

Recognizing the magnitude of the damage caused by this foreign policy initiative gone awry, the operational artist must ask himself what went wrong. The answer to that question is far beyond the scope of this paper, for the subject is complex and the quantity of evidence to be evaluated sufficient to keep scholars busy for decades. This paper will be content to focus upon one small part of that puzzle, the adoption and execution of the strategic hamlet program during 1961-1963 as the counterinsurgency strategy

that would defeat the Viet Cong and bring democracy and freedom to South Vietnam. The primary issue that I will address is whether or not the strategic hamlet program failed due to the absence of an operational link between strategic concept and tactical execution. In addressing this issue, I will focus on five fundamental questions:

- 1) What was the strategic context in South Vietnam during the critical period of 1961-1963, that window in time in which the United States first became an active and full-fledged ally of the South Vietnamese in their effort to defeat the communist insurgency in Southeast Asia?

- 2) What was the Strategic Hamlet Program and what was it intended to accomplish?

- 3) Why did the Strategic Hamlet Program fail?

- 4) What lessons can be learned from this failure?

- 5) Could a strategic hamlet approach serve as the basis of a viable counterinsurgency strategy?

The strategic context in Vietnam at the time the decision was made to pursue a strategic hamlet approach was defined by the interaction of four basic elements, the reaction of the principal parties to the Geneva Conference of 1954, the current state of the communist insurgency in

South Vietnam, and the respective political situations of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem and President John F. Kennedy. These four elements interacted to decisively effect the effort to achieve agreement between the United States and South Vietnam on the strategic approach to be used to defeat the North Vietnamese-inspired insurgency.

To understand the context in which the strategic hamlet decision was made, one must go back to the Geneva Conference of 1954 which recognized the end of formal French control over Indo-China. Although this settlement provided respite from years of political violence, it proved to be a bitter disappointment for Vietnamese who had looked forward to a unified and independent Vietnam.

For the Viet Minh, it was a series of disappointing compromises, forced upon them by the Soviet Union and China, which failed to recognize the spoils which they felt they had won on the field of battle. For the new state of South Vietnam, which had been granted independence by France while the Geneva Conference was in progress, the agreement was a settlement to which it had¹ not been a party and to which it could not subscribe.

As part of the accord, North Vietnam accepted a proposal for elections in 1956 to unify Vietnam under one government, only because it could not gain acceptance for

immediate elections and it was confident that whenever elections were held its leader, Ho Chi Minh, would win by a landslide. This was coupled with the belief that Ngo Dinh Diem, the new leader of South Vietnam, would quickly fall victim to the chaotic political factions of the South.²

When Diem refused consultations in 1955 to organize the scheduled elections, it became obvious to the North that he had no intention of observing the provisions of the Geneva Accord and that force would have to be used to unite the country. The Viet Minh army had been fighting the French throughout Vietnam and many of their veterans were natives of the South who had been relocated to the North during the inhabitant exchanges of 1954. These men, organized into cadres and given additional training, now became the nucleus of the Viet Cong.

In classic insurgency fashion, the period of 1954-1957 became the organizational and preparation phase as Viet Cong cadres moved into the South, repaired or adapted the old Viet Minh infrastructure, and extended their intelligence network into the new South Vietnamese government.³ In 1957, with a few isolated incidents, the terrorist campaign began. As Viet Cong operations expanded, the attacks grew in intensity and frequency until by 1961, platoon and company size guerrilla operations were being conducted and

large segments of the population and countryside were firmly
under their control.⁴

By November 1961, it was estimated that Viet Cong strength had grown to 17,000. In the first half of that year alone, they had assassinated over 500 local officials, kidnapped more than 1,000 civilians, and killed almost 1,500 members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).⁵ Such was the situation facing the Diem government as the Kennedy administration came to power in the United States.

From the perspective of Ngo Dinh Diem, the problems that he faced in his effort to mold the Vietnamese into a viable and sovereign nation-state, which would have been extremely challenging under any circumstances, must have appeared virtually insurmountable in the face of an increasingly brutal insurgency. He had barely survived a coup attempt in November 1960, and, with fairly good reason, saw himself surrounded by enemies on all sides.

In response, he centralized power in his own hands, trusting only his immediate family and a tiny circle of close associates. His general approach was to foster in both civil and military institutions, "tangled" lines of communication and crisscrossing chains-of-command as a means to inhibit the ability of plotters to organize and

execute a successful revolt against his regime.

The resulting chaos virtually guaranteed general governmental inefficiency and ineffectiveness in meeting the dual challenges of nation-building and internal defense. Diem also distrusted the United States and was unsure of its intentions. During the 1960 coup attempt, the United States had used its influence to get the coup leaders to negotiate with Diem for reforms, allowing Diem to retain his position, but with reduced powers. Whether because of their own indecision or US pressure, the coup leaders delayed and allowed Diem enough time to bring in loyalist troops and regain control. Diem resented the lack of unqualified US support and withdrew further into his protective shell. Thus Diem's first priority was the maintenance of his own position of power, with the tasks of nation-building and defending against the North's insurgency becoming secondary issues.

The United States was in a quandary concerning its position toward Vietnam and the Diem regime. Recommendations for action to President Kennedy stemmed from one of three basic positions:

- 1) Since the situation in Vietnam was bleak and a Communist victory likely, the US could not afford to be tainted with a losing effort and should distance itself

from Diem and Vietnam so as to cut its losses when the state collapsed.

2) Diem was not only the most legitimate, but also the strongest of all potential Vietnamese leaders. The situation in Vietnam was not good, but with immediate and unqualified assistance to Diem, the situation could be reversed to produce a strong, western-oriented state that would serve as a bulwark against further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

3) The Diem regime was unstable and could not be saved, yet the situation in Vietnam could be. The solution was to replace Diem with a more able leader who would be motivated and able to make the necessary reforms to allow a successful counterinsurgency effort.⁷

Those who advocated abandonment of Vietnam did so with little conviction, for the international events of Kennedy's first year in office virtually foreclosed any possibility of standing quietly by as Diem and Vietnam fell to a Communist insurgency. Up to this point, the political focus in Southeast Asia had been on Laos, not Vietnam, and the situation there had steadily deteriorated with the collapse of the US-supported faction seen as only a matter of time.

Closer to home, the Bay of Pigs disaster had already severely embarrassed the administration. In Vienna, Khrushchev's belligerent attitude had reinforced the tension

in US-Soviet relations at a time when they were already stressed over the Berlin confrontation. To walk away from the challenge in Vietnam would have only served to further undermine perceptions of US power and resolve, and was likely to encourage Soviet boldness and aggression elsewhere. The question was really not so much whether or not to aid Vietnam, but how to best structure that support so as to maximize US gains while minimizing potential costs.⁸

The second and third positions both recognized the US interest in ensuring South Vietnam's survival and held that with a sufficient degree of American support combined with Vietnamese reforms, the insurgency could be defeated. They differed on their attitude toward the Diem regime, with one calling for his support, the other for his removal. The US "expert" on counterinsurgency warfare was the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Brigadier General Edward Lansdale. He strongly supported Diem, seeing him as "the only Vietnamese with executive ability and the required determination to be an effective President If the 11 November coup had been successful, a number of highly selfish and mediocre people would be squabbling among themselves for power while the Communists took over."⁹ Instead of pressuring Diem to reform through a quid pro quo provision of military and economic assistance, Lansdale advocated strong, unequivocal support

as a means for gaining Diem's trust and cooperation.

The opposite view was expressed by Kennedy advisor John Kenneth Galbraith,

"The key and inescapable point is the ineffectuality of the Diem government. This is the strategic factor. . . . Diem will not reform either administratively or politically in any effective way. This is because he cannot. It is politically naive to expect it. He senses that he cannot let power go because he would be thrown out. He probably senses that his greatest danger is from the Army. Hence the reform that will bring effective use of manpower, though the most urgent, may be the most improbable."10

Galbraith was not alone in this opinion. for Henry Cabot Lodge, the US Ambassador to Vietnam in 1963, has stated that from his very first days in Saigon, he knew that the Diem regime was already into its "terminal phase".¹¹ The Kennedy administration recognized that social and governmental reforms were absolutely necessary if the insurgency was to be defeated. At one time or another, they would try both the pressure and the cooperative approach with Diem. Neither would prove to be particularly effective.

Beginning in May 1961, the United States and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) initiated a series of high level conferences designed to develop a strategic response to the insurgent challenge. President Kennedy dispatched a special commission, headed by General Maxwell Taylor, to Saigon to develop the US position for a counterinsurgency strategy.

After an extensive examination of the situation, Taylor concluded that it was critical and that vigorous US action in terms of advice and aid were necessary to buy sufficient time to organize and mobilize Vietnamese assets prior to taking the offense against the Viet Cong.

Taylor argued that before progress could be made, the Diem government would have to undergo substantial reform in two major areas. First, poor military intelligence resulted in the ARVN adopting defensive operations to guard against Viet Cong attacks, which placed the ARVN forces under the control of local province chiefs. This contributed to a tangled line of command and control, which in turn precluded the effective commitment of reserves in response to attacks. Continued defeats served to further limit sources of intelligence, creating a self-defeating
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cycle.

The second problem was the centralization of power in Diem's hands due to his fear of internal political opposition, particularly from the military. His mistrust of intellectuals and younger Vietnamese served merely to alienate them and bar them from constructive participation
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in an administration direly in need of their vitality. These problems combined to produce an incredible fragmentation of power below Diem, freeing him from fear of political challenge, but also negating any chance of effective

governmental action by his regime in its counterinsurgency efforts.

On 15 September 1961, the Taylor Commission produced two plans, the Counterinsurgency Plan for Viet-Nam and the Geographically Phased National Level Operation Plan. The first was an attempt to specify roles and relationships within the RVN and persuade Diem to adopt a single command line with integrated activities at each level of government. The second plan targeted primary areas for pacification operations and recommended a three-phase process to bring areas under government control. The first phase would be an intelligence and training effort for political and military cadres. Phase two was the use of ARVN forces to clear areas of Viet Cong and the establishment of continuous control by the Civil Guard (CG). In the final phase, the Self Defense Corps (SDC) would assume the civil action/local security mission, the population would be "re-oriented," political control executed by the local officials, and government control consolidated through the initiation of economic and social programs.

It should be noted that Taylor's recommendations appear to offer a plan that linked strategic, operational, and tactical concerns into a comprehensive whole. While these terms were not in use at the time, the two plans, taken together, attempted to weave the requirements for

political, social, military, and economic actions together to defeat the insurgency. Strategically, the Viet Cong would be attacked through a military and civic offensive designed to secure the population and turn its allegiance to the Saigon government. In an operational sense, it established a sequential and prioritized approach to pacifying specific areas, leading over time to a secure and loyal countryside. While general in nature, it defined logistical responsibilities that should have produced the materials necessary to set the conditions for effective implementation of the program. From the tactical perspective, the plans recommended specific reforms, missions, and actions which must be accomplished in each area if the plan was to be effective.

The effectiveness of Taylor's approach is unknown, for Diem refused to give Taylor's recommendations serious consideration. He opposed any effort to clean-up the lines of command and authority, fearing his generals only slightly less (if not more) than the Viet Cong. Instead, Diem embraced a plan offered by R.G.K. Thompson, the former Secretary of Defense in Malaya and current member of the British Advisory Mission in Saigon. Thompson recommended the same approach that the British had used successfully in Malaya. Instead of the main effort being directed at the destruction of insurgent forces, the government would

act to provide continuous security to the population coupled with development of rural areas as an attractive alternative to insurgent appeals.

In what would come to be known as the Strategic Hamlet Program, he proposed the "search and destroy" sweeps be replaced by "clear and hold" operations. ARVN would protect villages while they organized to protect themselves and would remain in the general area as a mobile reserve so as to be able to quickly reinforce local defense units attacked by Viet Cong. Security had to be ironclad so that the economic and social improvements, the key to the plan, could proceed without interruption. The means by which the population would be protected was the "strategic hamlet," a guarded village, situated to be convenient to farmer's fields, which would become the center of government civic assistance.¹⁵

To Diem, Thompson's plan was superior to Taylor's for two reasons. It allowed ARVN troops to remain largely under the decentralized control of provincial chiefs loyal to Diem and it provided a means to conveniently gain control over the population. After limited debate, the Thompson plan was accepted by Washington and became the central strategy for defeating the insurgency.

The US role in this strategy was a "limited partnership" with Vietnam in which the United States would underwrite an increase in the size of the ARVN, provide additional advisors down to the battalion level in ARVN and in each provincial capital, and provide much of the material and logistical support for the construction of strategic hamlets throughout the country. South Vietnam would be responsible for the actual conduct of the Strategic Hamlet Program and it was the US expectation that Diem would streamline his lines of authority and begin reforms designed to bring his regime closer to the people.¹⁶ As the Strategic Hamlet Program got underway, Diem claimed great success and Washington was so optimistic that it began planning for turning over the "mop-up" operations to the ARVN and withdrawing virtually all US advisors from Vietnam. This planning for the phased withdrawal of US forces started in mid-1962 and continued until early in 1964.¹⁷

For reasons that will be discussed shortly, the Strategic Hamlet Program failed and died with Diem in late-1963. There followed a period of incredible political instability, marked by coup and counter-coup. Strategically, it was a period of consolidation within those strategic hamlets which had been completed and a period in which US advisors strength crept up to the 20,000 mark in a largely futile

effort to improve the quality of ARVN tactical operations and leadership. Throughout this period, Viet Cong forces continued to grow and were reinforced by regular forces from North Vietnam.

While casualties had been inflicted upon US advisors by the Viet Cong, general attacks had been avoided and US installations had been largely treated as "safe havens" by the VC. This treatment ended on 7 February 1965, with a heavy attack upon US forces stationed at Pleiku. This raid precipitated a series of events which saw the start of US retaliatory air strikes against targets in North Vietnam and the adoption of a new strategy to win the war. Many factors beyond the scope of this paper contributed to the adoption of a new strategy and with it the decision to send US combat forces into Vietnam as active participants. We will now turn to an analysis of why the original strategy of the Strategic Hamlet Program failed.

The Strategic Hamlet strategy failed due to the absence of an operational plan which should have provided the necessary guidance and direction to translate the strategic concept into effective implementation. Suffering from this failure, the tactical execution of the strategy was characterized by four basic flaws: haste, inepti-

tude, lack of civic assistance, and the absence of critical quality control. The effort to rapidly execute the program without taking the time to develop a comprehensive plan or assemble the necessary resources virtually doomed the program from the start.

The program on which it was based, the British effort in Malaya, was characterized by meticulous planning and preparation. That program was enacted slowly on a hamlet by hamlet basis, insuring that tight security was achieved and a total package of civic assistance programs ready and available for distribution. The success of the concept was keyed to slowly building hamlets, starting from a secure area and then slowly branching out, gathering other hamlets into a protective umbrella, which in turn creates a sense of mutual protection through interlocking geographical areas.

In Vietnam, Diem directed his province chiefs to start hamlet construction some seven months before he established the committee charged with the program's direction and coordination.¹⁹ Local officials, fearing Diem's wrath, sought favor by "constructing" hamlets as rapidly as possible. It was not unusual for Vietnamese officials to divide a hamlet in half and count it as two. Hamlets went up helter-²⁰skelter, in a totally disorganized fashion. In the first six months of the program, RVN claimed that 3,225 of the

planned total of 11,316 hamlets had already been completed, allegedly housing over one-third of the nation's entire population.²¹ If true, it reflected an incredible construction rate which should have raised the suspicions of even the most optimistic American observers that quantity was overwhelming quality.

The lack of an operational link between the strategic concept of the Strategic Hamlet Program and implementation of the program in the countryside virtually ensured that execution would be flawed. Many of the difficulties encountered nationwide were obvious in the construction of the first "showcase" hamlet known as Operation Sunrise and begun on 22 March 1962. Contrary to the pleas of both American and British advisors to start the program in a relatively secure area, Diem decided to begin the effort near Saigon in Bing Duong province, an area long controlled by the Viet Cong. After much publicity, the first phase of the operation, a military sweep to clear the area of insurgents, kicked off. Not surprisingly, having been warned well in advance, the Viet Cong simply melted into the jungle.

With the VC at least temporarily out of the way, construction on the new hamlet commenced, with relocation of families to follow. Unfortunately, the government was able

to talk only 70 families into relocating into the new hamlet. Another 135 families were forced out of their homes and into the new settlement. Some came with meager belongings, many had only the clothes on their backs. Their old homes were burned behind them to preclude their sneaking back.²²

This reluctance to move by Vietnamese peasants emphasized a basic problem with the program. In Malaya, the British were dealing with a Chinese ethnic minority whose lifestyle consisted of squatting on public land, farming it for a brief period, and then moving on. They had no real attachment to any particular piece of property. In Vietnam, most of the peasants had been living and farming at the same sites for generations. Their little plots of land were usually colocated with ancestral burial plots of great religious significance to the current families. In order to build the new hamlets at an optimum size, two or more smaller hamlets were often combined. This resulted in the peasant being moved a considerable distance from his field, creating another substantial hardship in terms of transportation and lost time.²³

Seen in this context, it was hardly surprising to find that the peasants were, at the least, resentful at being forced into strategic hamlets. Corruption contributed to the resentment. In Operation Sunrise, the United States

had provided over \$300,000 in local currency to reimburse the peasants for loss of time, property, and labor required for construction work to finish the new hamlet. Virtually none of the money ever reached the peasants. The funds were being "withheld" until the local authorities were sure that the families would cooperate and stay in the new ham-
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let.

In a program in which security was vital to success, virtually none was provided. In theory, the inhabitants were armed with light weapons and trained by the ARVN. After six months, the weapons were to be withdrawn, as that was considered adequate time for the villagers to arm themselves with captured Viet Cong weapons. In April 1963, over a year after the program had started, it was reported that of the 197,858 "combatant youth" who were to defend the strategic hamlets, only 60,496 had received any train-
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ing and only 19,879 were armed (about ten percent).

In Long An province, one hamlet was protected by a wall 3,200 meters long, defended by 182 young men and 326 young women, of which only 120 had received any training. Even a fully trained and equipped US infantry company would not attempt to defend such a long frontage.

In Vinh Dong province, a local official was allocated 14-tons of barbed wire to defend each hamlet. He received

a total of 10-tons for 163 hamlets, making secure fortifications an impossibility.²⁶

It was not discovered until the summer of 1962, well after the program was underway, that the only means available to the defenders of a strategic hamlet to call for help to repel an attack was to send a runner to the nearest ARVN unit, a process that rarely took less than four hours.²⁷

Although the Americans responded with a crash program to place radios in each hamlet, the incident is indicative of the lack of planning and coordination in the overall effort and points to a basic misunderstanding of the program's purpose by many of the Vietnamese officials charged with its conduct.

The purpose of establishing secure hamlets in the first place was to insure the safety of those inhabitants who accepted the various social and economic benefits to be provided by government teams of doctors, teachers, veterinarians, agricultural and other experts, who were to move into each hamlet as it was completed. The fundamental premise of the whole program was that by providing security and civic benefits, the peasant would come to identify with and support the Saigon regime.

In fact, the civic assistance teams were rarely available, and when they did appear, rarely stayed for any significant period of time. For those that did, the Viet

Cong were quick to react by staging raids in which teachers and medical teams were killed and peasants who had been recipients of assistance were punished through beatings or ritual executions.

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In general, over-extension of the program played directly into the insurgents' hands. Report after report leaves one with the feeling that here may have been a very promising counterinsurgency approach, but it was destined to fail simply due to the incredible ineptitude of the Diem regime's management process. The principal reason for this inept performance was the failure to develop a comprehensive operational plan to bridge the gap between strategic concept and tactical execution.

What was equally incredible is the length of time that passed before the senior US civil and military leaders began to recognize that the Strategic Hamlet program as conducted by the Diem regime was a disaster instead of a success. A large part of this problem was their reliance on quantitative indicators to measure progress in an insurgency. Those who emphasized the progress of the Strategic Hamlet Program stressed statistical evidence to portray the exponential increase in hamlet construction, the declining trend in Viet Cong initiated incidents, the rise of VC defections, and the steady increase of RVN 'control-

led" rural areas.

For example, the Joint Chiefs of Staff observed that since fewer than two-tenths of one percent of the strategic hamlets were being overrun by the Viet Cong, the fortifications must be providing a high degree of security to the inhabitants. R.G.K. Thompson was probably much closer to the truth when he later observed that the absence of attacks was a strong indicator that the Viet Cong had already infiltrated and gained control over a large number of strategic hamlets.

After months of frustration from trying to get the Diem regime to adopt some kind of central plan to combat the insurgency, the American high command, both civil and military, was delighted to finally have a coherent, logical strategy for the conduct of counterinsurgency operations.

It is reasonable to believe, as David Halberstram charged, that the Americans wanted to believe that all their efforts were actually leading to constructive progress and thus became willing partners in a process of self-delusion.³⁰ In the Spring of 1963, a visiting US general was given an enthusiastic briefing by a Vietnamese official that in his province, 72 hamlets had already been completed with more under construction. In reality, only 13 had been completed and secured. When the official's

American military advisor reported this to the general, the general became angry and promptly accused the advisor of lying and being a negative influence on the progress of a sound project.

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By mid-1963, the American high command had come to recognize that all was not well with the Strategic Hamlet Program, but would not come to realize the extent of the problem until months later. For now, they continued to believe in the approach and were confident that if they could just get the Diem regime to reform its means of operation, most of the difficulties would disappear.

The US alternatives remained the same as they had been in 1961, either induce Diem to change his means of operation, allow Diem to do things in his own way and hope for the best, or find an alternative to Diem. The United States continued on the first course, Diem pursued the second, and different factors came together to produce the third.

As Diem continued to resist US pressure for change, he became increasingly involved in the Buddhist controversy and increased his repressive actions. On 1 November 1963, a military coup toppled his regime and ended with his murder. In the ensuing confused political situation, the inhabitants who desired to abandon the strategic hamlets did so and the Viet Cong took advantage of the lack of effect-

ive government control to overrun others. Many offered little or no resistance. The new junta briefly tried to revive the program under the title of "New Life Hamlets" in 1964, but the failures of the past provided a poor foundation for the future. The renewed effort lacked commitment and the program was abandoned after only a short time.

The failure of the strategic hamlet strategy offers a multitude of lessons. I will focus on just four of those. First, experience indicates that it is highly questionable whether an embattled regime is capable of accomplishing significant political or social reforms while it is simultaneously trying to conduct a major counterinsurgency operation.

This clearly presents a dilemma. Insurgencies generally don't take root unless there is significant need for reform, yet to effect major reforms in a tenuous political or social situation will likely be so destabilizing as to cause the collapse of the current regime, causing the incumbent, in the interest of his immediate self survival, to bitterly resist any attempt at reform.

The lesson would appear to be that if the success of the counterinsurgency operation is contingent upon signif-

icant reforms on the part of the host nation, approach the situation with extreme caution. Better to be a distant observer of the crash than to be trapped under the rubble.

Second, the strategic hamlet study clearly points out the absolute requirement for a linkage between strategy and tactics. Both the Taylor and the Thompson strategies represented logical and well considered approaches around which to build an effective counterinsurgency operation. Once selected, the Thompson approach was doomed to failure because there was no operational program to link the strategy to its tactical execution. The result was chaos and a complete subversion of the strategic intent. Where was the plan that would tie the controlled actions of the province officials to the available resources in a comprehensive and methodical march to the goal of a secure and loyal population? Failure to link the strategic concept to the policy execution should always produce a disjointed and ineffectual operation.

Third, is what I will call the influence dilemma. As the commitment and involvement of an outside force increases in a counterinsurgency situation, the need for that party to exercise increasing influence over the conduct of

the operation also rises. It does so because the outside force has become bound to the fate of the host regime, and can no longer allow it to fail. Yet if the host regime assents to this infringement on its sovereign status, it runs the risk of becoming a client state within its own nation, a status that will almost certainly play directly into the hands of the insurgent.

The strategic lesson appears to be that the outside force should avoid the temptation to take over the operation and must seek a low profile in terms of direction of the effort. Even as this takes place the outside force must achieve a solid working relationship behind the "closed doors" of the host nation that clearly defines the relationship and conditions on its involvement. Needless to say, this is a very difficult and delicate requirement.

Fourth, the strategic hamlet situation clearly reminds us of the need to analyze and judge each insurgency/counterinsurgency on its own unique merits. A strategic solution that worked in one place cannot be picked up and applied directly to another without courting serious risk of failure. Experience is important and conceptual approaches that proved successful in one place may, if properly tailored, may have great utility in another.

But each situation is unique and the differences must be identified and fully understood. The failure to recognize the Vietnamese peasant's attachment to his particular plot of land was of fundamental importance in terms of the utility of the strategic hamlet approach to the Diem regime. It may well have been possible to modify the approach to compensate for that difference, but the need wasn't recognized and the operation was doomed to failure before it started.

Having examined the failure of the strategic hamlet program as executed in Vietnam and after considering the lessons to be learned from that failure, the question remains, what utility, if any, does the strategic hamlet approach offer as a counterinsurgency strategy in agrarian societies of the Third World? Clearly, any effort must be tailored to the specific characteristics of a given situation. Mistakes such as Vietnam's effort to dislocate farmers from their ancestral plots can quickly destroy any effort. Yet, given that many agrarian, underdeveloped, Third World societies are characterized by populations living in scattered hamlets and villages, the strategic hamlet program appears to offer a logical approach to an insurgency situation.

One of the most demanding challenges inherent in a strategic hamlet approach is the requirement to provide comprehensive security on a continuous basis to a scattered population. Clearly that was not achieved in Vietnam by the Diem government. Nor is it likely that the proposals of either Taylor or Thompson would have been effective given the limited abilities of both the police and the ARVN, a situation likely to be common to most Third World insurgencies.

Scattered villages are inherently vulnerable to the kind of terrorist and small unit attacks which can be most easily performed by insurgent groups. The situation demands some form of self-protection on the part of the rural population, combined with reinforcement by national forces. In this case, Vietnam provides us with a possible solution to the problem, encadrement.

The US Marines experimented with an encadrement program starting in 1965 called the Combined Action Program. While the Combined Action Program (CAP) was in itself flawed as a tactical effort isolated from any operational or strategic effect, and was further hindered by uneven application and support, it produced an intriguing degree of success in providing security to isolated hamlets.

The Marines had been assigned an area of operations near Hue that was larger than they could effectively con-

trol and which had been nominally controlled by the Viet Cong over a long period. The people had no confidence in the government and the local Popular Force (PF) unit existed for all practical purposes in name only. The PF had received no training, refused to operate outside their hamlets or during hours of darkness, and rarely attempted to oppose Viet Cong movement or activities in the area.³³

In order to maximize the impact of their force, the Marines created combined action platoons by adding one US Marine rifle squad of 14 Marines and a Navy corpsman to the existing PF platoons made up of 38 local villagers. The Vietnamese members of the PF were full time volunteers who had been recruited from and assigned to their home villages as protection for their families.³⁴ The PF platoon maintained its regular structure, with individual Marines integrated throughout the unit. Their role was to serve as advisors, teachers, and a constant example of what a soldier is supposed to be.

The Marines lived with the PF members in the same tents, ate the same food, and conducted all their operations together. While the Marines provided a new level of leadership and professional ability, the PF members provided knowledge of the people, terrain, language, and local customs. In a surprisingly short period of time, the units became an effective fighting force, providing

security for their hamlets and conducting increasingly
aggressive patrols against the Viet Cong.³⁵

Throughout the war, no other program enjoyed a similar degree of success. Where once peasants had to be forced into the strategic hamlets, now they came voluntarily. In Phuoc Trach hamlet near Danang, over 2,800 Vietnamese moved in within two months of the establishment of a CAP unit there in December 1966.³⁶ Where once PF units had never ventured into the countryside after dark, they now conducted regular patrols. On one occasion in June 1966, they wiped out a Viet Cong platoon of 31 men in a night ambush.³⁷ By way of testimonial of the program's effectiveness, after two years and the establishment of 57 CAP units, not once had the Viet Cong been able to reestablish control over an area in which security had been established.³⁸

It would seem that the Combined Action Program and the Strategic Hamlet Program were made for each other. With the CAP unit providing effective local security, sufficient troops should be freed to establish a centrally located mobile reserve of at least one battalion strength, which could be available to react in support of any CAP-guarded village that was attacked by significant insurgent forces. With security assured, the way would be open for the host government to provide effective civic action pro-

grams and attract civilians voluntarily into the strategic hamlets, thus laying the foundation for strong communities that would identify with and support the local government.

With US advisors in place within the host government and US soldiers in place within the village structure, the US would be in a much stronger position to monitor the effectiveness of civic action programs, generating the feedback necessary to make effective program adjustments. Starting from a secure area, such a strategic hamlet approach could generate an ever expanding and interlocking defensive ring. Such a counterinsurgency strategy could prove to be an extremely formidable opponent to any insurgency movement. It would be combat on a slower and smaller scale, which would combine the efforts of the peasants, US combat forces, local military forces, and host government in a cooperative and mutually reinforcing effort which, by all rights, should produce a strong measure of support for the host country.

In this short paper, I have attempted to revisit the strategic situation which faced American and Vietnamese decision makers as they grappled with the dilemmas of launching a successful counterinsurgency effort in what I believe was our critical window of opportunity in Vietnam.

That the strategic context was complex in 1961 is beyond argument. It may well be that given the inherent domestic limitations on US foreign intanglements, the situation was already beyond repair at that time. The fact of the matter is that those decision makers did attempt to launch a counterinsurgency effort and it failed.

The strategic hamlet strategy held great promise and the concept didn't really receive a fair test in Vietnam. The experience in Malaya and simple logic suggest that an approach that combines security for the rural population and nationbuilding through effective civic assistance programs ought to deny the insurgent the support that is critical to his success while simultaneously increasing the support and effectiveness of the ruling regime.

What is clear is that the Strategic Hamlet Program as implemented in Vietnam failed due to the absence of an operational plan to link strategic concept to tactical execution. Such a link would have fostered the kind of direction and accountability necessary to achieve effective execution. Instead, the result was haste, ineptitude, a failure to follow through on the provision of critical civic assistance, and a lack of an effective means for the leadership to identify and correct the program's shortcomings in a timely manner.

The strategic lessons to be learned from this exper-

ience are many and include the following four. First, significant reform in the face of a serious insurgency is very difficult if not impossible. Wisdom would suggest that the counterinsurgency operation must be designed to succeed within the current political and social structure or not be attempted at all. Second, the operational level of warfare applies to insurgencies just as it does conventional war. There must be an operational linkage between strategy and tactics if the counterinsurgency is to succeed. Third, the influence dilemma facing an intervening force is inherent and must be managed with sensitivity and wisdom. A low profile with high profile effect must be achieved. Finally, it must be remembered that each situation is truly unique and must be analyzed and judged on its own merits. There are no "cookie-cutter" solutions in the real world.

Finally, my analysis suggests that the provision of effective security to the population is a prerequisite for the success of the strategic hamlet approach. In underdeveloped, agrarian, Third World situations, self-protection on the part of the villagers is probably the only viable approach, with encadrement along the lines of the Marine's Combined Action Program a likely solution.

I suspect that if these lessons had been applied by both the American and Vietnamese decision makers in 1961-

1963, the story of our involvement in Vietnam would have been very different.

ENDNOTES

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13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 8.
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31. Ibid., p. 187.

32. "Strategic Hamlet Program," p. 35.

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34. Marine Combined Arms Program, Vietnam (Pearl Harbor: Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, 1967), p. 4.

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36. Ibid., p. 16.

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38. Ibid.

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